

LARRY O'CONNOR

* * *

My *Lístek*

*A short stay in a Prague hospital may be
the best way to learn the notoriously
difficult language.*

AS I HOLD THE WHITE PIECE OF PAPER, I AM CAREFUL not to tug on the intravenous. Centered in bold at the top are the words *Jídelní Lístek*, and arrayed in sections beneath in the following order: *Snídaně*, *Oběd* and *Večeře*. Of course, it is all in Czech except for the word “cornflakes.” I have been in Prague before this trip and know that accents and punctuation change the sound and meaning of words, so I dare not try to even attempt to pronounce them. On my first morning in Cardiology, I don't have the strength to get out of bed. It is also the beginning of the weeklong Czech national holiday.

The admitting doctor, who spoke English, didn't mince words. “You have a blood clot in the calf of your leg,” he said. “Deep vein thrombosis. We will admit you immediately, and attach you to a bag of anti-clotting medicine. You are lucky, this is a hospital that is very good at treating this condition.” The price was certainly right: \$35 a night for a private room, less than the apartment we'd rented off Kampa Island. But no one has spoken a word of English to me since.

My *Lístek*

83

Certainly *jogurt* is yogurt, I think. *Džus*, I imagine because it is in a column with *voda* (water), may very well be juice. There are boxes to the left of each item on the single sheet of letter-size paper. Could *Snídaně* be breakfast? But if so, then there are five courses, with seven choices in the first course, twelve in the second, eight in the next, ten in the penultimate, and five in the last one. Forty-two in all. I turn to my Czech phrase book, where these words do not appear. Perhaps, then, the *Jídelní Lístek* isn't a menu at all.

I shift in bed and the pain in my leg is excruciating. Hopefully, I think, the admitting doctor has included in my record that my clots have a tendency to travel. Twenty-five years ago I had my first blood clot—and it traveled to my lung and nearly killed me. I have no way of knowing that this isn't happening to me now.

I expect a doctor to come by. Or a nurse who will give me some comfort, a sense that this hospital is a good one. So far, I am not convinced. For the national holiday, the admitting doctor said, the hospital is half-staffed. Even the patients who aren't so sick, go home.

One nurse, who changed my blood-thinner IV, left it leaking in the bed frame. For an hour, they couldn't connect the drip. Earlier, another nurse ate an ice cream cone the color of the brown pigeon I could see on a nearby roof while her colleague changed the dressing on my leg. I winced as she roughly undid the bandage, slathered goop from a white plastic bucket onto my throbbing calf. They paid me no further attention, and left.

Maybe this *lístek* was put there by mistake, I think. I have been studying it for an hour now and no one has yet come to take it from me. The word *voda* comes up four times. It's a questionnaire, perhaps. Is the water closet acceptable? The drinking water in the fountains? The mineral baths? Or a

When Dr. Hat begins treatment, he examines my leg closely and orders a nurse to change my IV. There's a pain in my chest and I hope it is only my mind playing tricks on me. Later, he is back again. I am drowsy, my eyes open to slits, as I watch Dr. Hat, dressed in a pressed white lab coat, brown corduroys, and Hush Puppies, before the desert triptych, slightly shaking his head. When the doctor turns, he shrugs his shoulders and raises his open palms in a way that does look like Chauncey Gardner after all.

Dr. Hat hustles me into a wheelchair and pushes me toward the hall. At the doorway, he checks both ways as if to see if the coast is clear, and then he takes me away from the nurses' station to an elevator beyond Cardiology. We see no one in the halls, or in the elevator. I close my eyes and drain the rush of air.

We do tests in a room and again it is only Dr. Hat and I. He bends over me, traces his finger down my leg where the clot is lodged, and the ultrasound machine dings, a cross between a cymbal clatter and a Microsoft boot-up. As he gently squeezes my leg blue and red sparks shimmer on the screen on either side of the clot.

Soon, we are going back. I am more awake, and notice we are in a service elevator, with a mop and pail standing in the corner, a trash barrel. We arrive at the rear of the eighth floor, and Dr. Hat picks up the pace. When the doors burst open, the nurses are standing before my room like girls smoking in the schoolyard. Suddenly, my nurse kneels in mock paparazzi form. The others file in behind as in a press clutch. A grandmotherly type raises her arms as if she had come upon the pope himself pushing the lonely man on the ward and not the illustrious Dr. Hat, who pushes me toward the nurses and slinks away to the sounds of their jeers and hoots.

That evening I am watching *Cry the Beloved Country*, with

James Earl Jones in the lead role, dubbed in Czech, when my dinner arrives. I have reached my doctor, who said my care sounded exactly right. My sister howled upon hearing of the story of Dr. Hat's return to the ward. Sounds even better than your care the first time, she said. If the pain in the chest persists, tell your doctor. Try not to worry.

Movie night has drawn the few patients who are in the hospital. They sit on orange vinyl cushions with chrome tubing, smoking cigarettes they stub in foil ashtrays. James Earl Jones is on the phone in a cabin that looks like Ponderosa when a young nurse I don't recognize brings me dinner. She puts down the tray and smiles, her eyes twinkling. Before me is a breaded, fried slab the size of two hockey pucks, a heap of succotash with flesh-colored shoots. I cut into the patty, and white cheese goo oozes onto the plate. Not bad, I say, catching the eye of the server, who laughs as she walks away. In a smoke-filled room of Cardiology, I chew and swallow a piece of the most cholesterol-laden meal I have ever seen.

Then, my nurse arrives. Is she going to give me tomorrow's *Jídelní Lístek* already? Unfortunately not. Instead, she pushes aside the half of the meal I didn't eat, then lifts my hospital gown up to my belly and with her other hand that had been hidden, she stabs me above the groin with a four-inch-long needle.

"*Dobré noc*," the nurse says, wishing me a good night's sleep.

"*Dobré noc*," I say.

Larry O'Connor is the author of the memoir, Tip of the Iceberg, and his essays have appeared in such places as The New York Times and The Globe and Mail. He also teaches in the graduate journalism program of Columbia University and works at the New York Post. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and daughter.